

Christmas Eve 2014 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

When the "Cold War" ended nearly 30 years ago it seemed to be a time when – after a long, dark night, hope's new dawn promised a new age of peace.

Yet now we find ourselves in a time when everything seems to be going to that "other place" in a hand basket: a time when racial tensions have again erupted throughout our nation, when a new, murderous Islamic Empire has been proclaimed, when a new "Cold War" ramps up, when random gun violence shatters our confidence in safe environments for our children, and when climate change threatens to steal away our human future.

Why, I wonder, are we surprised when – at the darkest time of the year – we discover that we are, again, crying out in the midst of dark times, when a raft of issues again rattles our trust in the possibilities of a new kind of human community.

I think that the hardest lesson we have to absorb in life's task of becoming fully functioning humans is this: circumstances can capsize the ship of our life and can do so on the turn of a dime. At that moment life can feel as if we have little to hope for, and without hope we're a dingy adrift in high seas

In my lifetime it seems that the natural patterns that construct and deconstruct our lives shift back and forth on shorter cycles between times of hopefulness and hopelessness. Any more, it doesn't seem like we can hope for very long.

What are we hoping for? What are we crying out for? For the hope of new possibilities in our world. For a more just and humane future. For a peace that isn't simply the absence of war but something more profound. For the triumph of community over the challenge of discord.

Hope is the ultimate human resource for facing the next wave of chaos that will swirl around us. Every generation, and every community, needs to find its own paths to hope, if they – if we – are to achieve anything of significance; if we're to do anything more than just survive.

It's in moments like this one, here, tonight – where we seek a common encounter with the Divine, with God – that we find the spiritual wisdom that ignites and sustains hope, that offers us the resources to face our world's hope-destroying challenges.

"Hope," Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaims, "is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness." Emily Dickinson observed that "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul – and sings the tunes without the words – and never stops at all."

The other day I got an email from one of you with a link to a YouTube video and one word: "enjoy!"

The video is different people dancing. It's almost entirely impromptu – on street corners, in

parks, in the countryside, in cities, at a wedding – anywhere, in fact, where people gather. The participants are old and young, men and women, boys and girls, in street clothes or national costumes, wedding dresses or tribal skirts; arab men in those long, white thawbs with keffiyehs on their heads having trouble kicking up their legs; tribal dancers in Papua New Guinea with face paint and in grass skirts and spears, a bride and groom in North Korea – all dancing, in unison, with little or no preparation. All dancing the same dance.

All smiling. Despite the challenges that many undoubtedly face, the unity and unison of the dance offered – in its surprise – a moment of joy, of hope for humanity in the face of all those things that rise up to haunt us.

Encapsulated in that video is the story of one man who discovered that hope can be found in dancing. He's not that great at dancing, but he's got a talent for getting others to join him, like the pied piper, and he's traveled the world and invited people in over 50 nations to dance with him – and they have. And they'll probably never forget that moment when everything else was laid aside so that they could dance – and hope.

Hope is always at the center of the greatest human narratives, because hope captures our hearts, hope remind us who we really are, hope re-connects us with the transformative stories that, like the first creation story in Genesis, remind us that all of creation – which against all reason and most evidence includes us – is good, good, very good.

So it is at Christmas: this is a story of hardship, of journey, of new life, and of transformation; it's a story with all the ups and downs of human existence and striving, and then some. – but ultimately it's a story of hope.

The promise of Nativity is the promise of strength through grace, of joy through struggle, of peace through love – the promise of hope – all made possible by the birth of a God-filled child who is for us – or who can be if we allow it – a freshly minted icon of the Divine, a place and a person and a moment of encounter with God who is hope-within-us.

And so here we are – on this day that the Scottish poet Alexander Smith said “holds all time together.” This is a day when we're told that we can be lost – because that's often how it feels in our complex, demanding, heartless world – we can be lost but need not be afraid, because there is hope. We can be lost but – this moment promises us – we're lost together. That dawn will come – dawn always comes – and we hold the dawn's burning rhythm in our hearts, We hold the flame that is God's love, and God's hope, and God's promise in our hearts, that we all hold within us the glowing embers of that not-so-distant fire that is the Spirit; that there is hope, that there is hope because of this moment of birth.

Despite the headlines, and even our own feelings, hope is all around us, no matter where we live or what the circumstances. It exists in every bittersweet longing for a better day; it murmurs in the hidden depths of our hearts; it shows itself in the humor shared between people at difficult times, forcing the monsters of fear and despair to surrender their ground to laughter. Hope provides the ballast for a buoyant soul that can float above chaos and become a beacon to others,

a rich promise of a transformed life.

This night, this moment, and this child speak of that hope.

"The earth has grown old with its burden of care
But at Christmas it always is young,
The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair
And its soul full of music breaks the air,
When the song of angels is sung."

Rt. Rev. Phillips Brooks

May the song of the angels – that is the song of hope – sing in your heart this Christmas, and every day. Amen.